

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony.

My name is Danielle Wirick and I live in Defiance City School District. I've come to speak to you today in opposition to SB293. My district was LifeWise's 4th adopter. It was adopted during covid, when everybody else was worried about just surviving. Many of us were blindsided by its adoption and lied to about what it was and how it was being implemented. LifeWise hired Phil Nofzinger, the superintendent at the second school the program was presented to and adopted at. Phil utilized his connections by trying to establish a program at every school system he had worked at in recent history, and he is currently the director at our school district's chapter. To this day, as roughly 80% of the elementary school body in my child's district is enrolled in Lifewise, there is no alternative instruction for those children that opt out of the program. Requests to observe what our children do or to see the curriculum they're being taught have been obfuscated and denied. If The majority Catholic and Lutheran Community knew that Life-wise considered their faith to be "watered down Christianity", as Lifewise's Buddy Workman calls it, and that they were converting the children of the community to Southern Baptism using the children themselves as missionaries, within the captive audience of the school, under the guise of being a non-denominational program, there would be major public outcry.

LifeWise is now large enough that it has begun steamrolling and edging out home grown local RTRI programs that it deems too small or that it considers to be "not true Christianity". Lifewise throws its weight around using donations from the community as well as deep pocketed political organizations and grants that local churches don't stand a chance against, unless they become a host church. A host church can only become one if their teachings are compatible. Bullying and marginalization of non-participating students, especially those students that are or perceived to be lgbtqia or of other faith traditions has happened because of the intolerance they teach. This program creates a hostile environment for those that don't believe as they do, even other Christians. The children parrot the harsh things they are being taught at Lifewise, and we know the kids are being taught this because Lifewise has posted videos from lessons in their curriculum where they teach children to condemn and other. Parents that have tried to bring our issues to my school have been told to just enroll our students in Lifewise or have been met with retaliation against us or our children. The children being left behind, especially the smallest of them, are often distressed because they are left behind to do nothing in near isolation. I've had to console my child many times because of this program because the kids bring the darkness of their lessons with them. The most violent parts of the bible are taught the earliest because their curriculum is chronological. Not one time have we had a nice conversation about character and values because of what these kids are bringing back to school, instead I hear about condemnation and demons.

Public records requests have turned up instances of incredible enmeshment between the schools and LifeWise. These range from Lifewise employees being brought on to the schools planning committee to implement LifeWise in the school which resulted in the school cutting a specials section to make room for LifeWise, to efforts to scramble and cover for the fact that no alternative to Lifewise had been implemented even though it was in its second year at the time and this is still the case. The records show the school teachers were being sent lifewise lessons to incorporate into their lessons. Which is interesting given the lawsuit they're now in about distributing the curriculum to others because they don't seem to want parents to know what's in it even though they make a point to recruit as much of the student body as possible. Our kids were telling us they were not being taught or were given extra work the others didn't have to do with no instruction time. We were denied our right to have the ability to observe what our kids did during their "Lifewise" period as it stated on their folders. As it turns out, we discovered that Lifewise's own documents would hold the answer that this was intentional. LifeWise calls this a "no new instruction period". In my child's case, a study hall for a kindergartener, which is still the case in my child's 2nd grade year.

In addition to this, we found that children were being disciplined at school for things that happened at LifeWise and that behavioral issues were being handled so badly by Lifewise, including a child being put in a physical restraint hold by an untrained Lifewise employee, with the school's response to LifeWise being that they "did the right thing" and that "the child needed Jesus", and the school not even being notified until after Christmas break about the event. The school also handed Lifewise their system for managing his behavior so that Lifewise could have disciplinary continuity with the school. Another instance involved children choking each other without receiving medical attention after, with no indication that lifewise notified the parents. Lifewise does not employ nurses or aides for students with disabilities or health issues, instead it leans on the school to supply these resources, to the detriment and risk of the students at the school. More than one instance of issues came up with aides being at LW and not the school. When a program seeks to be as large as being able to handle 800 plus kids a week it should have its own aides or medical personnel. Based on their profits they can certainly afford it, while the school cannot afford and legally should not be giving their resources to the program. This program is dangerous, it hurts education outcomes contrary to LifeWise claims, and it's disruptive to the school day. Students are a captive audience and get no say in their school day other than through the parents and the community. Making RTRI policies compulsory removes the right of the community and the parents to advocate for their children and for the community's unique educational needs. 910 hours of instruction are supposed to be given in the school day in a given year. Schools that implement LifeWise do not track whether the children are actually getting those hours. In the case of schools like mine, where even the kids that opt out get nothing, I have a serious concerns as to whether my school is giving the kids the required number of hours and what impact if any that should have on tax dollars received by the school when they abdicate the responsibility to teach each student for approximately 40 minutes each week.

RTRI has existed for some time and even in the capacity that it's been used previously, it's been prone to abuse and separation of state issues where it's been utilized by a majority of the school, leading to marginalization and disenfranchisement of the students in one way, shape, or form. This bill seems to have been put forth to serve the interests of Lifewise Academy, not religious children in general. The spirit of the law was to allow children of a faith tradition to further their faith, not as a missionary tool. They have previously testified that they mostly take the kids during recess and lunch. They say this to minimize the extent to which they are actually disruptive and this is intentionally misleading. In reality they prioritize seeking out a specials time slot to maximize the pressure to join because the impact of being one of few left is more deeply felt and more noticeable to those children. Lifewise can also accommodate more children if the school makes it more convenient for Lifewise in this way. Lifewise has previously stated that they don't want to force their way into schools when they promoted their program to the state school board in February of 2022. As soon as they started to receive a little push back, however, this organization began to show its true colors. When Fort Wayne schools told LifeWise no, Lifewise found legislators in Indiana to do their bidding and passed a law forcing the schools in Indiana to work with them to adopt their program. LifeWise has since created jobs within their organization for lobbyists to "identify low hanging fruit states" in which to force itself upon the school systems thereby changing the laws before any push back can take place. In Indiana's law, even core subjects are not safe from being skipped to make room for RTRI programs. Indiana law identifies "entities" as being able to pull children from schools while *Zorach v Clauson* identifies "duly constituted religious bodies" as being eligible to participate in RTRI. LW does not meet this definition. The existing Ohio law is already too vague and permissive to compel every school to make themselves open to any RTRI program from any entity claiming to be religious . Up until very recently LifeWise wasn't even compliant with the portion of the law requiring them to assume liability for the children to be eligible. This only changed at the demands of community members in a few school districts, who would have had no say if SB293 became law. SB293 opens up the door for cults and extremists that hide behind religious beliefs, such as the KKK to bring programs into our schools. Allowing the community to retain control of this decision can help to keep hate groups and cults out of the schools.

SB293 also opens up the school day to disruption by any organization seeking to exploit and commodify students for profit as long as they claim to be religious in nature. You need only to look at lifewise's rapidly increasing revenue vs expenditures despite the organization's explosive growth over the last couple of years to see that this is true. This is thanks to the ability to turn children to a commodity, a product to be bought by special interest groups and politicians that donate to lifewise. Many of which have direct ties to Project 2025. SB293 would take away local control which is a necessary check for the school system to manage its day in the best interest of its needs. Local school districts should be allowed to use their discretion to evaluate and even reject a program for secular reasons including encouraging a culture of intolerance incompatible with the school, disruption that puts a burden on the schools ability to educate students to the standards expected by the state, and the ability of the organization to safely manage students themselves without utilizing school resources and losing class time and focus. While Dewine is decrying a minute of phone distraction causing significant loss of focus, you've got to wonder just how long it takes students to be able to regain their focus after being sugared up and given trinkets at Lifewise. Zorach protects the local school systems right to exercise "the wisdom of the system, its efficiency from a local point of view, and the political considerations which have motivated its adoption or rejection in some communities." There is good reason that this decision should be left to the wisdom of the school system and the community. It is disingenuous to pretend that RTRI implementation only affects the children that opt in. Please vote no on this overly vague, permissive, and overreaching bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I will take any questions you may have.